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110440Z Dec 02

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ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00
	EB-00	ED-01	FBIE-00	UTED-00	VC-00	HHS-01	H-01
	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	L-00	VCE-00	AC-01	NSAE-00
	NSCE-00	OIC-02	OMB-01	OPIC-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00
	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00	IRM-00	STR-00	TEST-00	TRSE-00
	USIE-00	PMB-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-02	G-00	NFAT-00
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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7211  
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY  
ASEAN COLLECTIVE  
SECDEF WASHDC  
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 001270

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREF SOCI KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR ETMIN

SUBJECT: CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR FREEDOM FROM IT, IN DAK LAK AND GIA LAI PROVINCES

REF: A) HCMC 00131 B) HCMC 00739 C) HCMC 01227

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. DURING A RECENT TRIP TO DAK LAK AND GIA LAI PROVINCES IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, THE CONSUL GENERAL MET WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE COMMITTEES ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (CRA). IN THESE MEETINGS, CRA OFFICIALS DESCRIBED THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SOUTHERN EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF VIETNAM (SECV) IN FORWARDING APPLICATIONS FOR PROTESTANT CHURCH RECOGNITION; DISCUSSED CRA PLANS FOR THE UPCOMING CHRISTMAS SEASON; OUTLINED "UNETHICAL" PRACTICES ON THE PART OF SOME HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS; AND GAVE UPDATES ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN THEIR PROVINCES. THE CG INQUIRED ABOUT REPORTS OF HOUSE CHURCH CLOSINGS AND ARRESTS. THE CRAS EITHER CLAIMED NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE PROBLEMS, OR SAID IF THE PROBLEM INVOLVED "UNREGISTERED CONGREGATIONS", IT FELL UNDER THE PURVIEW OF "OTHER AGENCIES." END SUMMARY.

DAK LAK PROVINCE

2. (U) EMBOFF AND CONGENOFFS MET WITH MR. VO VAN TAI, CHAIRMAN OF THE DAK LAK COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (CRA) ON NOVEMBER 25. PROTESTANTS IN DAK LAK BELONG EITHER TO THE GVN-RECOGNIZED SECV, OR THE UNREGISTERED CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS, CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL, OR PENTECOSTAL SECTS. MR. TAI DESCRIBED PROTESTANTISM IN DAK LAK AS HISTORICALLY TAINTED BY A "DEGA" POLITICAL AGENDA FOR AN AUTONOMOUS STATE. HE NOTED THAT THE "ECONOMIC ADVERSITY" CAUSED BY THE PROLONGED DROP IN COFFEE PRICES CONTRIBUTED TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS. HE CALLED THE "BREAKDOWN OF UNCLASSIFIED

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THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GVN, CAMBODIA, AND THE UNHCR UNFORTUNATE."

3. (U) DAK LAK CRA CHAIRMAN TAI TOLD EMB/CONGENOFFS THAT AN SECV REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE (RC) HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED IN THE PROVINCE. ITS CHARTER SPECIFIES THE NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS, PASTOR/MISSIONARY CREDENTIALS, ETC. THAT ARE NEEDED IN ORDER TO REQUEST REGISTRATION AS AN SECV CHURCH. ACCORDING TO MR. TAI, APPLICATIONS FROM TWO CONGREGATIONS (ONE ETHNIC MINORITY, ONE VIETNAMESE KINH) ARE UNDER CONSIDERATION NOW. THE SECV RC HAS PASSED ITS RECOMMENDATION TO THE CRA, WHICH WILL DO FIELD INSPECTIONS OF THE CONGREGATIONS AND THEN PASS ITS RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE. SINCE THESE ARE THE FIRST TWO APPLICATIONS THE DAK LAK CRA HAS RECEIVED, TAI SAID HE IS NOT CERTAIN HOW LONG THE PROCESS WILL TAKE. HE APPEARED CONFIDENT, HOWEVER, THAT BY THE TIME OF A RETURN CONGENOFF VISIT (ANYWHERE FROM 2-6 MONTHS), THERE WOULD BE TWO NEW REGISTERED CHURCH CONGREGATIONS IN DAK LAK.

4. (U) FOR CHRISTMAS 2002, THE DAK LAK CRA PLANS TO MEET WITH THE BISHOP, PRIESTS, PASTORS AND SECV BOARD OF DIRECTORS (IN HCMC) TO REVIEW THE YEAR'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICIES, ORDAINING NEW PRIESTS, BUILDING NEW

FACILITIES, ETC. ACCORDING TO CRA DIRECTOR TAI, HE "COMMUNICATES CANDIDLY WITH THE RELIGIOUS DIGNITARIES" AS TO WHAT GOOD HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED AND ALSO THE "NOT SO GOOD." HE SAID THE DAK LAK PROVINCIAL CRA INSTRUCTS DISTRICT AUTHORITIES TO DO THEIR BEST TO MEET RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS' EXPECTATIONS FOR HELP IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION, AS A MEANS OF CREATING "SOME EMPATHY BETWEEN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND UNCLASSIFIED

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RELIGIOUS GROUPS." MR. TAI SAID THAT HE AND HIS COMMITTEE VISIT THE REGISTERED (CATHOLIC) CHURCHES WITH GIFTS DURING THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

15. (U) DAK LAK CRA CHAIRMAN TAI NOTED THAT SOME PROTESTANT HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS HAD ALLEGEDLY ENGAGED IN UNETHICAL PRACTICES. ACCORDING TO MR. TAI, BELIEVERS HAD CALLED THE CRA'S ATTENTION TO SOME PASTORS WHO HAD COLLECTED DONATIONS AND SPENT THEM ON THEMSELVES WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR CONGREGATIONS. HE ALSO STATED THAT SOME GVN-PROVIDED RELIEF SUPPLIES HAD BEEN DIVERTED BY A FEW PASTORS FOR THEIR PERSONAL USE. HE SAID THERE WERE REPORTS THAT "DEGA" PROTESTANTS IN PARTICULAR USED DONATIONS TO PURCHASE MOBILE PHONES AND MOTOR VEHICLES.

16. (U) QUERIED ABOUT EVENTS IN EAKAR DISTRICT, MR. TAI SAID HE WAS AWARE OF TWO BUDDHIST PAGODAS THERE, BUT NO (RECOGNIZED) CHURCHES. THERE IS A TEMPORARY SITE FOR (RECOGNIZED) CATHOLIC WORSHIP, BUT THERE IS NO SECV-RECOGNIZED PASTOR. WHEN PRESSED, HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT EAKAR AUTHORITIES HAD CRITICIZED SOME PROTESTANT FOLLOWERS "FOR BAD PRACTICES", BUT WOULD NOT ELABORATE. DAK LAK CRA CHAIRMAN TAI ACCEPTED AN UNDATED "NON-PAPER" LIST OF CASES (REF B) ALLEGEDLY INVOLVING DOZENS OF DETENTIONS, "CHURCH CLOSINGS", ETC., BUT DID NOT MAKE A COMMITMENT TO FOLLOW UP ON EVERY CASE. HE DID OFFER TO BRING THE CG TO EAKAR DISTRICT ON HER NEXT TRIP TO DAK LAK. (NOTE: POST WILL

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	H-01	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00	L-00	VCE-00	AC-01
	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OIC-02	OMB-01	OPIC-01	PA-00	PER-00
	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00	STR-00	TEST-00
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7212  
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY  
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FOLLOW UP ON THE LIST AND TAKE HIM UP ON THE OFFER.)

17. (U) MR. TAI ACKNOWLEDGED THAT "DUE TO LACK OF EDUCATION AT THE DISTRICT, COMMUNE, AND VILLAGE LEVELS, SOMETIMES MISTAKES ARE MADE. WE DO INSPECTIONS AND TRY TO CORRECT MATTERS WHEN WRONGDOINGS ARE CALLED TO OUR ATTENTION." (NOTE: NATIONAL-LEVEL COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS OFFICIALS HAVE INDICATED THAT THE CURRENT DECREE ON RELIGION ONLY ALLOWS THEM TO SUGGEST CORRECTIONS, NOT REQUIRE THEM. THE GVN IS WORKING TO REVISE THE DECREE. END NOTE.) ACCORDING TO MR. TAI, WHILE THE PROVINCE'S 412 "SUB-ASSOCIATIONS (UNREGISTERED HOUSE CHURCHES) ARE NOT APPROPRIATE, IN REALITY THEY ARE ACCEPTED."

18. (U) WHEN ASKED TO IDENTIFY DAK LAK'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR 2003 AND IN THE LONG-TERM, CRA CHAIRMAN TAI CITED IMPROVING ETHNIC MINORITY LIVING CONDITIONS -- TO EQUAL, OR COME CLOSER TO THAT OF THE VIETNAMESE KINH IN THE PROVINCE. TO MEET THIS CHALLENGE, HE IS CONVINCED THAT FOREIGN JOINT VENTURES AND INVESTMENT ARE NEEDED.

GIA LAI PROVINCE

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19. (U) MOVING TO GIA LAI, CG MET WITH THE DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (CRA), MR. MAI KIM DONG, ON NOVEMBER 26. HE RELATED THAT AN SECV REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE (RC) HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED THERE, CONSISTING OF TWO ETHNIC MINORITY PASTORS AND ONE VIETNAMESE KINH PASTOR. THE GIA LAI SECV RC'S CHARTER STRESSES  
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"SERVING CHRIST, THE PEOPLE, AND THE NATION." GIA LAI PROVINCE HAS THREE REGISTERED SECV "ASSOCIATIONS" (CHURCHES), WITH TWO MORE APPLICATIONS PENDING. IN ORDER TO APPLY FOR RECOGNITION, A CONGREGATION MUST HAVE 100 OR MORE MEMBERS, BUT MR. DONG SAID HE BELIEVED THE SECV RC CHARTER LEFT OPEN THE POSSIBILITY FOR "SUB-ASSOCIATIONS" TO COMBINE AND APPLY. HE ESTIMATED THAT THERE WERE 312 SUB-ASSOCIATIONS IN THE PROVINCES, AND SAID THEY WERE ALL "OPERATING NORMALLY." ACCORDING TO HIM, THERE ARE ABOUT 94,000 PROTESTANTS IN GIA LAI.

110. (U) DEPUTY CHAIRMAN DONG POINTED OUT THAT WHILE "DEGA" BELIEVERS WORSHIP JESUS, THEY HAVE BROKEN WITH THE SECV RC AND ARE NO LONGER RECOGNIZED BY THE SECV. ACCORDING TO HIM, THE SECV BELIEVES HAVING "DEGA" MEMBERS WILL NEGATIVELY AFFECT THEIR OPERATIONS.

111. (U) REGARDING OTHER RECOGNIZED RELIGIOUS FOLLOWERS IN GIA LAI, MR. DONG COUNTED NEARLY 76,000 CATHOLICS WHO WORSHIP IN 40 CHURCHES. HE TOLD EMB/CONGENOFFS THERE WERE TWO PRIESTS STUDYING IN THE U.S. RIGHT NOW. (NOTE: WHILE PRIESTS/MONKS/NUNS FROM REGISTERED RELIGIONS ARE ALLOWED TO TRAVEL OVERSEAS, POST KNOWS FOR A FACT THAT AT LEAST IN HCMC, MANY "UNREGISTERED" HOUSE CHURCH PASTORS REGULARLY TRAVEL ABROAD. END NOTE.) BUDDHISTS IN GIA LAI NUMBER NEARLY 66,000. SIXTEEN NEW PAGODAS WERE OPENED IN 2002, FOR TOTAL OF 70. ACCORDING TO MR. DONG, THERE ARE 10 MONKS STUDYING IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA RIGHT NOW, AND 300 OTHER MONKS AND NUNS WHO ARE IN VARIOUS STAGES OF TRAINING IN GIA LAI PROVINCE. HE CHARACTERIZED THE BUDDHISTS AS "POOR COMPARED TO THE CATHOLICS," SO THE PROVINCE WOULD PROVIDE  
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TRANSPORTATION FOR THEIR DELEGATES TO THE BUDDHIST CONGRESS IN HANOI THIS MONTH. ALTHOUGH ONE OF OUR ESCORTS WAS NUDGING MR. DONG TO WRAP IT UP, DONG PROCEEDED TO SAY THERE WERE ABOUT 1000 SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS AND CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL BELIEVERS IN GIA LAI - SEPARATE FROM THE SECV - AS WELL AS ABOUT 3000 CAO DAI BELIEVERS.

112. (U) WHEN ASKED TO IDENTIFY GIA LAI'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR 2003 AND THE LONG-TERM, CRA DEPUTY CHAIRMAN DONG SIDESTEPED THE QUESTION BY SAYING HIS COMMITTEE "ONLY APPROVES PROPOSALS FROM THE SECV RC." ACCORDING TO HIM, THE CRA ONLY DEALS WITH "REGISTERED CHURCH PROBLEMS. OTHER AGENCIES DEAL WITH UNREGISTERED CONGREGATIONS."

113. (U) BOTH DAK LAK CRA CHAIRMAN TAI AND GIA LAI CRA DEPUTY CHAIRMAN DONG APPEARED PROUD OF THE NATIONAL CRA PUBLISHING HOUSE, ESTABLISHED IN 1999. MR. TAI PRODUCED A BROCHURE DETAILING THE DOZENS OF MATERIALS IN STOCK. ACCORDING TO MR. DONG, THE SECV "HAS APPLIED" TO HAVE THE NATIONAL CRA PUBLISHING HOUSE PRINT THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS IN THE JARAI AND BAHNAR ETHNIC MINORITY LANGUAGES. PROTESTANT MATERIALS AND WRITINGS BY CATHOLIC BISHOPS WHO PREACH IN ETHNIC MINORITY LANGUAGES ARE ALSO SOUGHT AFTER, BUT NONE HAS BEEN PUBLISHED YET. VIETNAMESE-LANGUAGE VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE ARE ALREADY AVAILABLE.

COMMENT

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INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00
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	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00	IRM-00	STR-00	TEST-00	TRSE-00
	USIE-00	PMB-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-02	G-00	NFAT-00
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14. (SBU) BOTH MR. TAI AND MR. DONG CITED ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, LARGELY DUE TO THE DROP IN INTERNATIONAL COFFEE PRICES, AS THE CAUSE FOR ETHNIC MINORITY VILLAGERS' POOR LIVING CONDITIONS. ENSUING PROTESTS AND FLIGHTS TO CAMBODIA WERE INCITED BY "HOSTILE FORCES" IN THE U.S. (REF A). HOWEVER, COMPARED TO PREVIOUS VISITS, THE TONE WAS NOT AS STRIDENT OR HOSTILE. ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT CHURCH CLOSINGS AND DETENTIONS WERE CAREFULLY WORDED TO INDICATE THAT THE COMMITTEES ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS WERE ONLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE "RECOGNIZED" SECV.

15. (SBU) GVN RECOGNITION OF THE SECV IN APRIL 2001 PERMITS THE REGISTRATION OF SECV CHURCHES. THERE HAS BEEN NO RUSH OF CENTRAL HIGHLANDS CONGREGATIONS TO REGISTER. NO DOUBT THERE ARE MANY REASONS FOR THIS, AS DAK LAK AND GIA LAI PROVINCES PROCESS THEIR FIRST REGISTRANTS. PROVINCIAL AUTHORITIES AND THE PROTESTANT HOUSE CHURCHES ARE WARY OF EACH OTHER - HOW MUCH CONTROL/OVERSIGHT WILL BE EXERCISED; CAN THEY TRAIN ADEQUATE NUMBERS OF PASTORS; WILL THEY BE ALLOWED TO FOLLOW THEIR RELIGIOUS CONSCIENCES (DAK LAK'S MR. TAI WAS ADAMANT THAT WHILE PRAYER IS FINE, HUNGER STRIKES ARE NOT). EVEN IF THE PROVINCIAL SECV RCS HAVE DIVORCED THEMSELVES FROM "DEGA" ELEMENTS (ESPECIALLY IN GIA LAI), THIS DOES NOT ERASE YEARS OF ENMITY. THE 100-MEMBER MINIMUM IS HARD TO ACHIEVE IN THE SPARSELY POPULATED PARTS OF THIS REGION, THOUGH IT APPEARS INDIVIDUAL CONGREGATIONS CAN COMBINE FOR LARGER NUMBERS FOR REGISTRATION PURPOSES.

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16. (SBU) POST DOES NOT ANTICIPATE THAT MANY CONGREGATIONS WILL APPLY FOR RECOGNITION IN THE NEAR FUTURE, AS THEY WILL WANT TO WAIT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS TO THE FIRST REGISTRANTS. THIS WILL SET UP A PROTRACTED PERIOD OF CONTENTION AND/OR CONFRONTATION IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, AS THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE LEGAL RIGHT OF VIETNAMESE CITIZENS TO WORSHIP IN THEIR HOMES AND THE GVN REQUIREMENT THAT ALL CHURCHES BE REGISTERED IS TESTED. YAMAUCHI

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